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LESSONS FROM AFGHANISTAN AND IRAQ

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For almost a decade, international coalitions led by the United States have been supporting complex democracy-building efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. The international community has regarded the establishment of a democratic political system as a key element in the successful reconstruction of each country, in part because of the belief that a democratic order would be more legitimate and more just. In addition, U.S. policy makers hoped that the success of democracy would inspire a transformation of the broader Middle East—whose political, social, and geopolitical dysfunctions have produced extremism, global terrorism, and violent conflict.

The effort to support democracy in Afghanistan and Iraq has taken place while these countries have been dealing with the related challenges of nation-building. In order to unify the two fractured countries, the international community has worked to develop national compacts among diverse peoples and key groups. State-building has been necessary as well. Decades of tyranny and war in the two states have inhibited the emergence of institutions that can perform the functions of a normal state and win the trust of their peoples. Both countries also face the challenge of demobilizing militias and insurgents. Economic development and reconstruction have been another area of focus. The goal has been to improve standards of living and demonstrate that the new order can deliver greater prosperity.

These undertakings have been attempted even as numerous actors

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have fought against the emergence of a democratic order. Remnants of the old regimes, new insurgents, and regional terrorists have continued to pose security challenges. Further complications are added by struggles between religious and more secular forces, by powerful elites' resistance to sharing power with others or to playing by the rules of the new order, and by an unwelcoming regional environment.

The principal features of the democratization efforts have been an initial interim political arrangement; an electoral road map; the adoption of new constitutions; the development of civil society; the introduction of basic human rights; the establishment of the rule of law; the formation of political parties; and the building of effective state institutions. Both countries have made progress on many of these fronts. Yet the level of progress has been uneven, and there have been some setbacks. There are both similarities and differences between the trajectories of Afghanistan and Iraq.

As we think about the challenge of supporting democratization in postconflict settings, the key areas of focus should be the process of achieving postconflict stability through political agreements among important groups; the stability of constitutional and governmental institutions; the effectiveness of the electoral system and political parties; and the evolution of political leadership dedicated to national rather than parochial political outlooks.

After the Initial Transitions

In postconflict situations, a transition from wartime to peacetime political leadership is typically required. After the internal conflicts wind down, political conditions often enter a "warlord phase." Power lies in the hands of those who gain control over people and resources through the command of armed groups. Militias are the coin of the realm. In the immediate postconflict period, it is critical to create space for leaders and groups who seek power based on popular support, and to engineer a transition that diminishes the influence of armed groups.

This poses a dilemma for those who seek to help advance the transition. On the one hand, outside powers can occupy a country and use their own power to bring armed groups and militias to heel. This is a high-cost option that also can generate internal resistance. On the other hand, external powers can choose to accommodate armed internal actors, while overseeing a gradual transition toward democratic politics. This option requires fewer outside forces and is less likely to provoke armed opposition, but it can slow the transition away from militia-based politics.

During the immediate post-Taliban period, Afghanistan lacked basic national institutions. Effective local control was in the hands of powerful individuals. Some of these leaders were unpopular with the Afghan

population, and the atrocities that they had committed during the early 1990s contributed to the rise of the Taliban. Those charged with making U.S. policy feared a return of these past patterns, recognizing that quasi-feudal power centers were not conducive to the goal of democratization. At the same time, the coalition did not seek a long-term occupation and was unwilling to expend the effort necessary to challenge and remove these figures.

The United States favored a phased transition that accommodated powerful political figures while helping Afghans to build a political system that would require these forces to play by a new set of rules. The challenge lay in finding ways to integrate these forces into the new order and to deter them from mistreating their people. The United States hoped that new institutions, as they matured, would control and eventually displace such forces. The other key goal was to prevent the Taliban from regrouping by reaching out to those who were prepared to reconcile while attacking the more extreme, irreconcilable elements. The Coalition and its Afghan allies made significant progress in both respects during the years immediately after the toppling of the Taliban, only to see these efforts falter over the last few years.

In Iraq, the initial situation after the transition was quite different. The country had powerful institutions, including a strong national army. In this case, however, the Bush administration opted for the coalition to become an occupying power in order to accelerate the transition away from Saddam Hussein's dictatorship. The Coalition Provisional Authority governing Iraq dissolved the Baath Party, dismissed many of its members from the government, and disbanded the military and other security forces. As a result, a large number of people saw no place for themselves in the new order. Sunni Arabs took a hostile position, as their rivals, the Shia and the Kurds, gained stature and became the base for the newly emerging order. The political process during the initial phase was characterized by the dominance of Shia religious parties, minimal Kurdish integration, and some obstruction from Sunni Arabs. Sectarian violence grew, as did insurgency, terrorism, and militia violence. It became increasingly important to bring the Sunni Arabs into the political process, undermine sectarian elements, defeat al-Qaeda, and discourage the Shia and Kurds from overreaching by persuading them that fair Sunni Arab participation and shared political power was a better formula for progress and stability.

Two lessons emerge from the Afghanistan and Iraq cases. The first is that external powers should not become occupiers. It is better to create an inclusive political process, like the one adopted in Afghanistan. This model empowers local actors to start normalizing their politics. The second lesson is that external actors should not take a "hands-off" approach once the host country establishes an interim political regime. Instead, they should position themselves as mediators ready to help local lead-

ers to overcome differences, and as facilitators who will shoulder some of the burden of demilitarizing armed groups and moving the country toward normal politics.

Crafting Constitutions and National Compacts

New written constitutions have been critical features of postconflict democratization in Afghanistan and Iraq. In both countries, the new national compacts reflected the major political challenges that local leaders faced. The resulting constitutions, developed with U.S. and other external support, laid the foundation for new orders. Both constitutions strike a delicate but necessarily ambiguous balance between Islam and secularism.

The design of Afghanistan's constitution reflected the challenge posed by the weakness of the existing state. The document embraced a centralized system in the hope that this would expedite state-building. It established a strong presidency with a parliament and an independent judiciary. At the Constitutional Loya Jirga, delegates were more concerned with creating an effective national government than they were with curtailing its power. There was broad support among the key groups for a unitary state, though some favored a parliamentary rather than a presidential system and a few argued for a federal system.

The upside of this approach was that it drew on Afghan traditions, particularly from the period in the 1950s and 1960s that many Afghans view as a golden era of political stability and progress. This approach also avoided the risk of political paralysis, which has bedeviled many democratizing states. Because local-government capacity hardly existed or was in the hands of warlords, Afghans understood that the best route to improved governance was to build up the national government. As a result, they opted for a unitary system that had the capacity to act. Such a centralized system poses two main risks, however. First, the concentration of power in the presidency means that those who lose a presidential election may feel shut out of power. Second and more important, it puts a premium on effective and rapid state-building. If the national government is to fill such an ambitiously conceived role, strong tools need to be put at its disposal.

Iraq's post-Saddam constitution, by contrast, reflects that country's ethnic differences and the Kurds' unwillingness to accept a strong Arab-controlled center. Having endured decades of Saddam's oppressive rule, Iraqis wished to weaken their country's central government. Their new constitution embraces a federal and parliamentary system that delegates substantial powers to the regions and provinces. It requires a supermajority for many key decisions in order to ensure that no one ethnic group can dominate the process. There were varying degrees of support for federalism among the religious Shia parties, but Sunni forces

opposed it altogether. The deal that ultimately brought the Sunni Arabs into the political process contained an agreement to amend the constitution soon after its ratification and to review articles dealing with the formation of future federal units.

Despite these important differences, the approaches to democratization taken in Iraq and Afghanistan were very similar in some respects. The articles in both countries' constitutions on women's representation, freedom of faith, and basic rights are almost identical. Both guarantee freedom of faith, equality among citizens, and freedom of speech, and each uses a slightly different set of fixed quotas in order to ensure that women will have the opportunity to participate in political life.

Working on their respective constitutions with Afghans and Iraqis, I took the view that they needed to use the process to solve fundamental political challenges facing their societies and to find power-sharing arrangements that would give all groups a stake in stability and progress. Because of the differences in their histories and societies, the nature of those challenges differed in Afghanistan and Iraq. The process involved tough negotiations, as well as a catalytic international role, but the result in both countries has been a political order that facilitates normal politics and problem solving.

In postconflict countries, it is essential to ensure that all groups and factions are represented in governmental institutions from the outset. In addition, effective political parties are necessary to channel participation constructively. In Afghanistan, the political process achieved broad-based electoral participation quickly, but an effective party structure still has not taken shape. In Iraq, the first election in January 2005 failed to achieve broad-based participation, resulting in polarized sectarian politics. Success in expanding participation came over time, but it was hard-won. At the same time, political parties have matured more quickly in Iraq.

In Afghanistan, the first election held after adoption of the constitution went well, with more than 70 percent of eligible voters participating. The election ensured that all groups had a stake in the new order. Afghan political parties, however, did not experience the same level of growth and maturity. This is in part due to the country's use of the single nontransferable vote (SNTV) system, but it also reflects the suspicion with which many Afghans view political parties. Indeed, both Iraqis and Afghans have traditionally exhibited skepticism about political parties. People in both countries associate "parties" with militias and violence. The word invokes bitter memories—of the Soviet-era communist parties and warring *mujahideen* parties in Afghanistan, and of the destructive role of the Communists and Baathists in Iraq.

While party affiliation can be a candidate's ticket to office in Iraq, Afghan candidates were prohibited from even stating their party affiliations. Even though Afghanistan has more than a hundred political par-

ties, most of which competed in the parliamentary and provincial elections of 2005 and 2009 and managed to mobilize at least a degree of popular support for candidates, these parties are far less influential than their Iraqi counterparts.

The SNTV system for general elections has been controversial in Afghanistan. Although supporters argue that it is "more democratic" in absolute terms, opponents contend that it has impeded the formation of effective political parties—a key element in the development of democracy. This is because the system emphasizes individual electability at the expense of political-party influence. Moreover, the SNTV system reduces the effectiveness of parliamentary politics by encouraging candidates to push local, ethnic, or tribal issues rather than working toward a national agenda. The SNTV system worked to the advantage of ethnic and military strongmen, warlords, drug traffickers, and human-rights violators in the 2005 elections for parliament and provincial councils. Accordingly, SNTV limited the ability of the legislative bodies to work efficiently, independently, and in support of state-building. As stronger political parties develop, it is more likely that well-qualified candidates will emerge in national elections, that the general focus will be on national issues and state-building, and that the government will have fewer chances to permit fraud and to weaken the democratic process.

In Iraq, the failure to achieve broad-based participation in the January 2005 election had catastrophic consequences. The Sunni Arabs boycotted the election, resulting in a parliament and government in which they were not represented. Subsequent actions by both the government and the Sunni Arabs led to polarization and escalating sectarian violence. In late 2005, I worked with Iraqi leaders of all factions to ensure that the December 2005 election, under the new constitution, would involve all groups and produce a fully representative government. Still, in these first elections after the constitution was adopted, Iraqis voted according to their ethnic and sectarian identities. This was not surprising, since the elections were held at a time of high sectarian tension. Yet the inclusive nature of the election laid the political foundation for a government of national unity that could begin the work of bridging sectarian divisions and starting the reconciliation process.

Iraq's shift from party-list proportional representation (PLPR) toward an "open-list" variant during the run-up to the most recent election has contributed to the development of more effective political parties. This change came at the right time. The role of ethnic or sectarian identity in politics was diminishing because of improved security and increased Sunni Arab cooperation with the Baghdad government and the coalition. The Iraqi government began to take stronger action against Shia militias—a step which, in turn, created incentives for politicians to adjust their platforms and respond to the changing moods among their constituencies. The combination of electoral reforms and improvements

in the political-military situation is facilitating more moderate and less intensely ethnic or sectarian forms of politics.

In the 2010 election, the al-Iraqiya bloc, led by Ayad Allawi, successfully presented itself as a secular, nationalist, and trans-sectarian option, appealing to Shia and Sunni Arab voters alike. Sunni Arabs, who had become disillusioned with their former choices—first, a boycott, and later, a group of highly sectarian Sunni Arab Islamists—looked beyond Allawi's "Shia" background and saw in his coalition a set of ideals that resonated with their aspirations. Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's State of Law Coalition adopted a similar strategy. It too distanced itself from its more sectarian former allies—the Sadrists and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI)—in an effort to broaden its appeal across sectarian lines.

The two Iraqi coalitions were also keen to present meticulously written and detailed electoral programs in which they sought to address the issues that most interested voters. This was a huge development when compared with the electoral programs that the parties had presented just a few years earlier, which amounted to little more than a page or two of generic remarks. Slogans and personalities had become insufficient to win over a more demanding and more politically aware electorate.

The ISCI recognized these trends as well. Its new young leader, Ammar al-Hakim, came to realize that the idea of turning Iraq into three largely autonomous substates divided along sectarian and ethic lines—a project that his late father had strongly supported—did not resonate well with the majority of voters. Over time, the idea faded from the ISCI's agenda, and the party eventually dropped it altogether.

Three Lessons

In this regard, three main lessons may be drawn from the postconflict democratic transitions in Afghanistan and Iraq. First, the rules of the game need to be designed in such a way that they produce political dynamics responsive to the host-country's challenges. Second, external actors should continually engage local leaders and steer them toward political strategies that move their countries forward. This is a subtle but vital contribution to fostering successful democratic transitions. Third, organization and mobilization of constructive political forces are crucial. At a minimum, the United States should do more to encourage democratic forces to coalesce in order to exert greater influence. This is vital for the consolidation of a democratic order.

In other areas of democratization, progress has been robust in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Hundreds of newspapers and scores of television and radio stations are operating with unprecedented levels of freedom. Although poor security and threats of violence from militias and insurgents still challenge the media, state censorship is virtually absent. Non-

governmental organizations have also mushroomed. Thousands of such groups now act as advocates for human rights, fairer labor standards, education, election monitoring, and even environmental protection.

Iraq has made faster and more visible progress than Afghanistan in strengthening the rule of law. Underlying conditions in the two countries account for this difference. Iraq has substantially greater material and human resources that can be used to build or repair state institutions and security forces. By contrast, external actors devoted limited resources to the task of building Afghanistan's security and legal institutions, even though these had to be created from scratch. At the outset, international actors designed plans for Afghan security forces based on the resources that donors were willing to commit and on the potential revenue base of the Afghan government. Their goals for Afghanistan's forces were more modest as well, based on the overly optimistic assumption that these forces would face a benign security environment. Although both Afghanistan and Iraq have roughly the same populations, Iraq has fielded security forces three times the size of Afghanistan's. The latter's tough terrain, larger area, widely diffused population, and poor communications infrastructure make the mission of the smaller force in Afghanistan even harder.

The Importance of Leadership

Political leadership has had a profound effect on the course of events in both countries. Differences in leadership styles and effectiveness have complex correlations with the levels of progress reached in building the state, democracy, and the rule of law. It is also clear that international actors can help local leaders to improve their performance significantly.

Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai is a case in point. In the early years after the Taliban regime fell, he was heralded as an effective leader who forged political unity and progress to a degree that few had thought possible. More recently, however, Karzai has faced accusations that he is appeasing warlords and is unable or unwilling to confront them. The reality is complex. From 2003 through 2005, Karzai led a political process, supported by the United States, that demobilized militias nationwide while ensuring the political inclusion of all significant figures who supported the constitution and opposed extremists such as the Taliban. This was a major achievement, and the Afghan people supported it.

In subsequent years, however, neither Karzai nor the United States and other external powers maintained this momentum toward normalizing Afghan politics and improving governance. This is why support for Karzai has eroded. Yet many are too pessimistic about what Karzai can achieve. The United States can help to revive Karzai's reform agenda through a close partnership with his government.

Iraq's Prime Minister Maliki was the target of similar criticism in 2006 and 2007. Up through the latter year, he had largely accommodated Shia militias such as the Mahdi Army of radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. By the spring and summer of 2008, however, Maliki had taken a sharp turn and changed his approach from appeasement to aggressive confrontation. He dealt hard blows to armed militias in several locales. Maliki would not have been able to accomplish this change, of course, without significant growth in the capabilities of Iraq's security forces.

Although Afghan security forces have also grown substantially, Karzai has not felt strong enough to take on warlords and insurgents. In recent elections, he allied himself with warlords, deeming this necessary for him to win. He has also been hesitant about confronting erstwhile allies at a time when the Taliban pose a more important threat. This is doubly true given his poor relations with the United States over the past two years. The United States must improve its relations with Karzai in order to reverse these trends. If Karzai is confident about his U.S. alliance, he can be persuaded to take risks to improve governance. A renewed partnership can lead to improved leadership on Karzai's part that will put Afghanistan on a much more promising trajectory.

The democratization efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan have met with some success but also with setbacks and obstructions. Historical experience suggests, however, that democracies take time to establish themselves and to mature. By any standard, the democratic enterprises in Afghanistan and Iraq are still very young.

In addition to all the internal challenges that they face, both Afghanistan and Iraq have neighbors who are wary of the emergence of stable and strong democracies on their doorsteps. Several regional powers have sought—both covertly and overtly—to undermine progress. The emerging democracies in Afghanistan and Iraq cannot offset such regional interference without continued support from the world's advanced democracies.

The degree to which state-building has been successful has had clear effects on the trajectory of political development in Iraq and Afghanistan. Improved security played a major role in facilitating recent positive trends in Iraq. Poor security and weak institutions contributed to the problems in the 2009 presidential election in Afghanistan.

Successful elections, institution-building, the rule of law, and economic and social development are mutually reinforcing goals. Progress toward achieving any one of them is bound to promote progress toward achieving the others. At the same time, setbacks in any of them will have negative effects on the others. Overall there has been more progress than setbacks.

Democratization in Iraq and Afghanistan is a complex work in progress. Yet popular support for democracy remains strong in both countries. The chances for success remain greater than the chances for failure.